

MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES: MONOGRAPHS

MUSIC/IMAGE: transpositions, translations, transformations...

Department of Musicology
Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade



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Editors

Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman
Vesna Mikić
Tijana Popović Mladjenović
Ivana Perković

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Miloš Bralović

Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu

JOSIP SLAVENSKI'S MOVING PICTURES – *MUSIC FOR CHAMBER ORCHESTRA*

ABSTRACT: The question of the relationship between music and painting in the field of fine arts is a familiar one, especially if we are examining that relation in a specific era, such as during the first half of the twentieth century. In that manner, the main topic of this paper will be a comparison of the composition by Josip Slavenski called *Muzika za kamerni orkestar* (*Music for Chamber Orchestra*, here chosen as a case-study), completed in 1938, and the early avant-garde works by Natalia Goncharova. In addition to that, the question of the integration of folklore elements into a modernist work of art will be examined.

KEY WORDS: Josip Slavenski, Modernism, Russian avant-garde, Rayonism, Natalia Goncharova, folklore.

While trying to compare different art forms, one faces many problems, but they may all have a single solution and that is finding the common criteria by which all the arts or artworks may be compared. Bearing that in mind, we shall try to compare (in the broadest sense of that term) the correlations between the Rayonist works of the Russian avant-garde project, by Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), and *Muzika za kamerni orkestar* or *Muzika 38* (*Music for Chamber Orchestra* or *Music 38*, with relations to several other works of the 1930s) by Josip Slavenski (1896–1955).

There are several common criteria for comparing these artworks. For now, two will be named, which should appear as the most obvious: Modernism as the dominant context of Western fine arts, the tradition in which the mentioned artworks are created and inspiration drawn from folklore. This brings us to a question: What are the ways and means of integrating elements of folklore into a Modernist work of art? Before we try to answer it, we shall examine some elements of the poetics of Goncharova and Slavenski one by one, and then try to find common ground between them.

Modernism, folklore and image

Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964) invented the practice of Rayonism. Natalia Goncharova, his professional collaborator and lifelong partner, followed in his

footsteps. However, Rayonism occurred after several years in which these two artists were searching for a new style. Starting from the early 1910s, as members of the groups the Knave of Diamonds and later the Donkey's Tail for a short period of time, and also later on, their style evolved from Neoprimitivism based on Russian folk motives, to Cubism, Futurism, and finally in 1912, Rayonism.¹ Goncharova was inspired by Old Russian art forms: woodcuts and embroidery.² While working on her Cubofuturistic and Rayonist paintings, she also completed several works in the Russian folk style.³ The importance of these paintings in folk style is that they served as a means of gradually preparing the Russian public for abstract art, by the use of abstract folk patterns.⁴

In the Preface to the Catalogue of the One Man Exhibition in 1913, Natalia Goncharova proclaimed the main goals of her artistic work. Among them she stated that she will "...make continuous use of contemporary achievements and discoveries of art, [...] draw [my] artistic inspiration from my country [Russian Empire] and from the East," and that she will, "...put in practice M. F. Larionov's theory of Rayonism."⁵

Larionov's theory of Rayonism deals with the status of the object in painting. It is interesting that this new way of painting was compared with composing music: "...it is necessary to find a point at which [...] painting would remain itself while its adopted forms would be transformed and its outlook broadened; hence, like music, which takes sound from concrete life and uses it according to musical laws, painting would use colour according to painterly laws."⁶ Later on, trying to precisely define Rayonism, Larionov adds: "...*Luminosity owes its existence to reflected light (between objects in space it forms a kind of coloured dust). The doctrine of luminosity. Radioactive rays. Ultraviolet rays. Reflectivity.*"⁷ This, in Larionov's terms, means that we are not able to see objects, but only the rays that appear from a source of light and reflect from the object, or, "...a sum of rays proceeding from a source of light; [...] reflected from the object and enter our field of vision."⁸ Should we paint what we see, we are to paint this sum of those reflected rays.⁹

¹ Cf. H. H. Arnason, *Istorija moderne umetnosti [History of Modern Art]*, prev. Vladislava Janičić, Ksenija Prodanović, Maja Landratoške (Beograd, Orion Art, 2003), 200.

² *Ibid.*, 201.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Natalya Goncharova, "Preface to Catalogue of One Man Exhibition, 1913", in: John E. Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-garde. Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, (New York, The Viking Press, 1976), 58.

⁶ Mikhail Larionov, "Rayonist Painting, 1913", in: *ibid.*, 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*

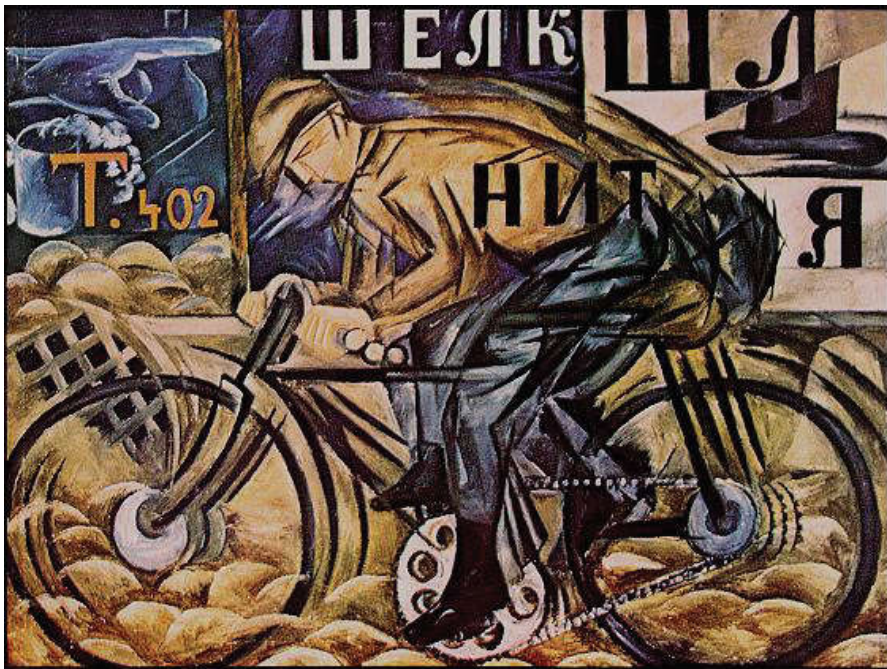
⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

Although Rayonism was proclaimed as the first movement of abstract art in Russia, by observing several works by Goncharova and Larionov, we may

Plate 1. Natalia Goncharova, *The Reapers* (1910)

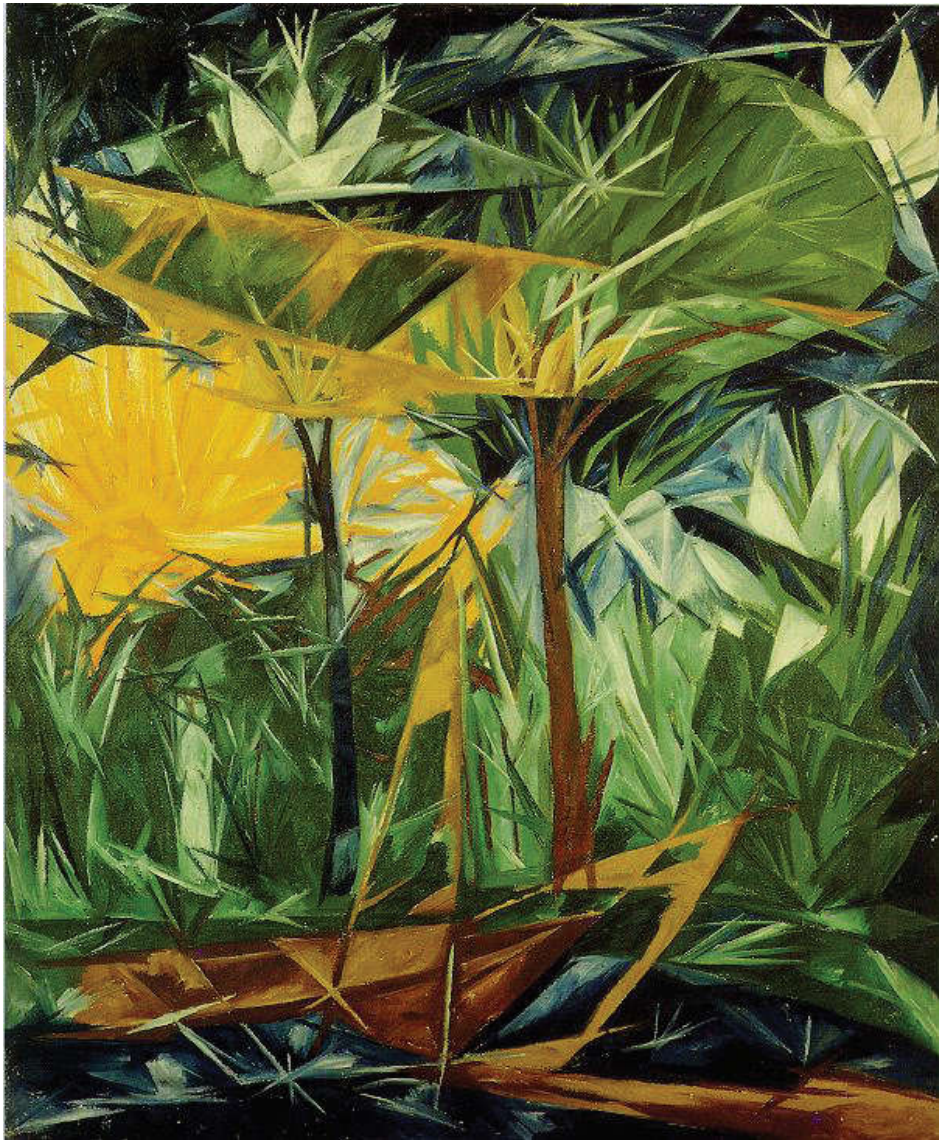


Plate 2. Natalia Goncharova, *The Cyclist* (1912)



see that they did not fully renounced objectivity, especially if we bear in mind the fact that Rayonist painting should represent the sum of reflected rays of light. This is obvious in several works by Goncharova painted around 1912. If we look at some of the Neoprimitive paintings, such as *The Reapers* (1910, see Plate 1), or *Icon painting motifs* (1912), one will notice the manner in which Goncharova was influenced by folklore. It is more than obvious that, by reproducing folklore motifs in these paintings, Goncharova annuls the traditional conception of painting as a window into an imaginary three dimensional world,

Plate 3. Natalia Goncharova, *The Forest* (1912–1913)



thus creating a two dimensional painted surface. This practise started with French Symbolism in the nineteenth century (later developed in Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism) and it is important to note that Goncharova achieved a similar result by approaching the problems of contemporary art from a different angle, by using folklore motifs. Looking at Goncharova's Cubofuturist works such as *The Cyclist* (1912, see Plate 2) we see a fragment of contemporary, urban Russian life (the notion of urban Russian life is probably emphasized by the Russian Cyrillic letters). Finally, by looking at Rayonist compositions, such as *Cats (Rayist percep.[tion] in Rose, Black and Yellow)*, (1912) or *The Forest* (1912–1913, see Plate 3) we see a sort of a synthesis of the previously mentioned elements, but realised within a new style, elaborated by both Larionov and Goncharova.

Modernism, folklore and music

As with Goncharova, Josip Slavenski drew his inspiration from folklore – this time musical folklore. But, due to his inexhaustible interest in that topic, sound as an acoustic phenomenon and also astronomy, Slavenski constantly sought innovation by getting familiar with the new compositional techniques of the first half of the twentieth century and combining them with his points of interest. Or, in his own words: “While in Western European schools for modern music, in courses of free composition, it is taught that modern melody should be free of old patterns, and artificially modulative (by using all 12 chromatic tones). Besides that, a melody should be free from all the symmetrical rhythms and rhythmical units, and our composers have huge advantage in forming modern melodies by subordinating them to the natural, non-artificial influence of folk melodies.”¹⁰ By this we may see that both the art of Goncharova and the music by Slavenski are inspired by folklore, which is used as a base for innovation. Where Rayonist art, although derived from folklore, owes much to the art of Cubism and Futurism,¹¹ the mature works of Josip Slavenski, as we are going to demonstrate through the example of *Music 38*, are also strongly connected with the contemporary trends in the European music of the 1930s.

¹⁰ [„Dok se u zapadnim evropskim školama za modernu muziku na časovima slobodne kompozicije uči kako moderna melodija treba da se oslobodi starih šablona i veštački se pravi modulativna (u tome se ide čak do svih 12 hromatskih polustepena), osim toga, da melodiju treba oslobađati svih šablona i simetričkih ritmova i ritmičkih jedinica, dotle naši kompozitori imaju ogromnu prednost za formiranje svojih melodija u prirodnom uticaju narodnih melodija”, (engl. transl. by author)], Mirjana Živković, „Muzički folklor u studijama Josipa Slavenskog“ [“Musical Folklore in Josip Slavenski's Studies”], in: Mirjana Živković (ur.), *Interakcija muzike i vremena [Interaction of Music and Time]*, (Beograd, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2014), 77.

¹¹ Cf. H. H. Arnason, op. cit., 200–201.

The first section (bar. 1–113) of *Music 38* opens with an ostinato pattern in the string section, divided into five layers. Each of them is built upon a tone row (the violins, the viola and the double bass parts share the same tone row: D, E, G, A, B) and a different ostinato pattern (with the exception of the second violin and viola parts). This forms a permanently vibrating ostinato layer. As soon as the main subject (in the Dorian mode in E)¹² of this work appears in bar. 8 in the clarinet part, the woodwind parts (more precisely, the flute and bassoon parts) are joined into the ostinato layer with new rhythmical patterns (see Example 1). In all, the woodwind parts are more freely treated. Using the fragments of the main theme in the clarinet parts, several ostinato patterns appear in other woodwind parts, sometimes even building up short counter-themes to the main theme.

Example 1. Josip Slavenski, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, Allegro ma non troppo, bar 10–12¹³

The image displays a musical score for Example 1, covering bars 10 to 12. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes the woodwind section: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Cor Anglais (Cor.), and Bassoon (Fg.). The second system includes the string section: Violin 1 (vn 1), Violin 2 (vn 2), Viola (vi.), Violoncello (vc.), and Double Bass (cb.). The woodwind parts feature various rhythmic patterns and melodic fragments, while the string parts provide a complex, multi-layered ostinato texture. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

This static ‘musical image’ changes into a short transition section starting from bar 37, where the triplet motif interchanges with ‘sour’ pedal chords within the whole chamber orchestra. At bar 51, the strings take over the main theme (with the exception of the double bass part which takes over the rhythm of the ostinato figure from the second violin or viola parts, but with different pitches,

¹² One should note that most of the Međimurje folk songs are in the Dorian mode, and for Josip Slavenski, the use of the mode (if there is not an actual quotation of a folk tune) is always prompted by the typical sound characteristics of Međimurje folk songs.

¹³ All the sheet music examples are from: Josip Slavenski, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, [score], (Zagreb–Belgrade, DSH–UKS, 1986).

see Example 2). Meanwhile, the woodwinds build a quasi-ostinato layer, using several fragments from the main theme.

Example 2. Josip Slavenski, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, Molto cantabile (con dinamica spontanea) bar 61–63

In bar 88, a secondary theme (in the Aeolian mode in B) appears in the Horn section (see Example 3). The strings take up a homorhythmic ostinato layer, while the woodwinds are still treated relatively freely, in a similar way to the previous sub-section.

Example 3. Josip Slavenski, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, Molto cantabile (con dinamica spontanea), bar 88–90

The second section starts at bar 114, with the second theme exposed in the first violin part (see Example 4). A modal counter-theme appears in the second violin part (both the theme and counter-theme are in the Aeolian G sharp). The rest of the sections are tonally centred around C, and have three different ostinato patterns. The ostinato patterns in the viola and cello parts are both five measures long, they are repeated once and prolonged by one measure in the repetition. The ostinato figure from the double bass part is similar to the formation of the kettle-drum part in Josip Slavenski's earlier orchestral work *Chaos* from 1932. The double bass part is built upon three pitches, identically to the kettle-drum part in *Chaos*, which form an infrapentatonic nucleus of C, B flat and E flat, thus recalling an old Međimurje folk song *Tu za repu, tu za len* (*Grab the Beet, Grab the Flax*).

Example 4. Josip Slavenski, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, Adagio (ma non troppo), bar 115–117, strings

At bar 125, the cello part changes to a two triplet ostinato figure, while the previous ostinato pattern in the viola part is repeated once more. At bar 134, the viola and second violin parts are broken into syncopated ostinato patterns, while the last ostinato pattern appears in the first violin part at bar 135. Starting from the same measure, in the woodwind and horn parts there is a canonical development of the main subject, based on the interplay of its fragments.

The final section of the work appears at bar 157 (see Example 5). In the strings, another reference to *Chaos* appears: the quotation of the main twelve tone subject within the triplet figuration with the pedal tone C in the double bass part. Meanwhile the woodwinds play the main theme in C in parallel ninth chords. The second theme reappears at measure 187 in the horn part, also in C, while the woodwind and string parts interchange the twelve tone subject integrated in a triplet figure.

Example 5. Josip Slavenski, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, Allegro dinamico, bar 166–168

Modernist image – modernist sound

By now, we have seen two, at first sight, different ways of integrating folklore into a modernist work of art. However, all the differences come from the mere nature of the media which is used. This means that there are more similarities than it seems.

Considering the fact that Slavenski used music material essentially derived from folklore (modal folk like melodies, tone rows based on pentatonic scale, and so on), we may reach the conclusion that the presence of folklore is reduced to the ‘building material’ of the piece. But, the way of ‘building’ the composition corresponds to something else. To quote the musicologist Eva Sedak, Josip Slavenski uses “...compositional procedures that relate more to repetition than change.”¹⁴ While repetition seems obvious as a compositional procedure, we must note that changes to the music material also play an important role in Slavenski’s works in general.

Starting from the multi-layered ostinato at the beginning of the composition, we notice a number of fragments are used to create all the layers of the piece. These fragments are used in a very specific interplay, which to some extent corresponds to Jonathan Cramer’s definition of nonlinearity which is

¹⁴ [„...skladateljskih postupaka koji teže ponavljanju, a ne promijeni“. (engl. transl. by author)] Eva Sedak, *Josip Štolcer Slavenski, skladatelj prijelaza [Josip Štolcer Slavenski, Composer of the Transition]*, svezak prvi, (Zagreb, Muzički informativni centar), 1984, 28.

defined as a principle of “...*determination of some characteristic(s) of music in accordance with implications that arise from principles or tendencies governing an entire piece or section.*”¹⁵ This means that the principle of ‘constructing’ a piece of music, or, in this case, Slavenski’s *Music 38* is based on elements which lack the principle of casual logic, or linearity, among them. The presence of linearity, which is represented by elements in which the first causes the second and so on, is a distinctive trait of tonal music.¹⁶ At this point we must acknowledge that *Music 38* is tonal (or tonally directed) music, and that the abovementioned interplay of fragments corresponds to the principle of *ars combinatoria* as the main principle which governs the musical movement. In other words, *Music 38*, like many other works by Slavenski, lies somewhere in between Cramer’s two principles.

Just like Goncharova, who used folklore motifs to gradually de-objectify her paintings, and later on to subordinate objects to rays of light, Slavenski used motifs from musical folklore and subordinated (or incorporated) them into the contemporary compositional techniques of his time, while his main goal was to explore sound as an acoustic phenomenon. As we have sought to explain, Goncharova approached contemporary art from a different angle, being inspired by folklore. Slavenski, in fact, did the same. By his rather intuitive approach to musical folklore, the composer transformed it into a vehicle of a typically modernist, exploratory method of composing, thus creating his own, unique artistic expression, and finally coming close to non-linear musical time.

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¹⁵ Jonathan Cramer, *The Time of Music*, (New York, Schirmer Books, 1988), 20.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.* Linearity and nonlinearity can be present in the same work, or a section of a work.

SUMMARY

This paper deals with the notion of modernist innovation via the use of folklore in the paintings of Natalia Goncharova and music of Josip Slavenski. By a brief analysis of their works (several Neoprimitivistic, Cubofuturistic and Rayonist paintings by Goncharova, and *Music 38* by Slavenski), I tried to demonstrate the ways of creating modernist art by seeking inspiration in folklore. The reinterpretation of folklore in both music and painting always consists of filtering folklore, or folk like motifs, through modernist painting styles or compositional techniques. It is worth noting that the use of folklore does not necessarily creates anachronic works of art, but rather, in the works of these two artists, folklore is used to create a different and rather unique approach to contemporary art, thus enriching it. In other words, contemporary art is not negated, but brought further into modernism.